



# BUSINESS

## JOB-FINDING HELP

# Program pinched as need increases

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THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

County offices that help laid-off Inland Southern California workers hone their skills and look for new jobs are not going to have any extra money with which to do it this year.

And these offices may have to operate on lean budgets for most of the next two years, work-force development officials say.

At the issue's core is the federal Workforce Investment Act, a 1998 law that funds job training, adult education and other services through employment development offices in San Bernardino and Riverside counties. Congress is supposed to reauthorize the law periodically, but it hasn't for five years.

Reauthorizing a federal law usually adjusts its funding to account for inflation, and the state's latest study of the Inland labor force seems to indicate that more resources are needed. Unemployment in the Inland area was 6.7 percent in January, up from 5.4 percent a year earlier, the state Employment

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Development Department reported last week.

Also, the Inland job base has been shrinking for the past 12 months.

"We've consistently had our funds cut for the last five years," said Curt Hagman, the chairman of the Workforce Investment Board for San Bernardino County. Counties appoint private business people and public officials to these boards to supervise the spending of federal money.

Jamil Dada, chairman of the Riverside County board, said part of the problem has been a Department of Labor assistant secretary who urged Congress to not increase the funding. That official recently left the department, Dada said.

"Each year it wasn't authorized, it became more diluted," Dada said. "And each year, she kept throwing up roadblocks."

Dada and Hagman were part of a delegation of about 20 Inland leaders that visited Washington, D.C., last month and met with the Inland congressional delegation, along with Reps. George Miller, D-Martinez, and Howard "Buck" McKeon, R-Santa Clarita, and the majority and minority leaders of the committee with jurisdiction.

Also, Douglas Small, the Department of Labor's new deputy assistant secretary for employment and training, understands the counties' plight, Dada said.

"He said, 'No more roadblocks, we will support this, and you will see change,'"

Dada said.

Dada said overall funding for the two Inland counties' workforce development offices has been cut by 40 percent in the past five years — a time when the Inland Empire's population has increased.

Both counties operate "one-stop centers" where counselors help with problems that run from fixing up resumes to retraining. The five years of cuts have meant fewer resources for the teams that move quickly when there is a mass layoff.

Hagman said the office's services are not well-understood by federal officials. He said 80,000 people a year come to the one-stop centers in San Bernardino County, but only those who receive full public-private partnership job training services — about 2,300 people a year — can be documented for the federal records.

"The way the law is written, those 80,000 people is not something we can report," Hagman said.

Dada said the scenario will change in some degree next year when a new administration takes over in Washington, especially if a Democrat, who he said would likely be friendlier to reauthorization, wins the White House.

But even if that happens, it may take a year for a new administration to sort its priorities and get its sea legs, meaning reauthorization might not go onto the table until 2010, he said.

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